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www.the-criterion.com

criterionejournal@gmail.com

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Optimism in Africa with Reference to Smith's Motswana Fiction: A Reinterpretation

Dr. Uttam B Sonkamble
Asst Professor of English
SMRK BK AK Mahila Mahavidyalaya
Nasik – 422008.

The African literature continues to be the mainstream interest area of the researchers since the last few decades for its diverse writing of African phenomenon. Portrayal of the writing by its authors has been such that it fascinates the readers irrespective of its literary genre. A creation of an author is a reflection of his life and it helps the readers appreciate their life and society through his perspective that he depicts. The African literature churns through the world literature by leading in the fiction category. The African authors by and large depict the issues like the racial, colonial and post-colonial, violence against women, and poverty-stricken life. Most literary works along with the media of today highlight on these areas by presenting before the world its filthy picture. This portrayal of Africa is the fact and cannot be refuted. This can be credited to the twofold persecution one to the colonial powers and the neocolonial attributes the other and ever since the sub Saharan Africa suffers of numerous issues like; racism, poverty, unemployment, malnourishment/maltreatment, violence against women, AIDS etc. which de facto reflect in the African literature. Here are the prominent African authors and their subjects they deal: Chinua Achebe with the war ravaged people, starvation and violence, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o - British colonialism, struggle for independence and neo-colonial era, Steve Biko – empowerment of black people with his popular slogan "black is beautiful", Ama Ata Aidoo – cultural clash, Nadine Gordimer - love and racial politics, Buchi Emecheta – women's problems of poverty and oppression, Yvonne Vera - infanticide, rape and abortion pertaining to the Zimbabwean body politics, Ayi Kwei Armah - glimmers of hope for an alternative future, sense of life and nation, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie – voicing same as Achebe, Nuruddin Farah - struggles of women, Ousmane Sembène - cultural practices and political discourses surrounding the female body in Africa, Bessie Head - racial identity, Mariama Bâ - gender relations, power and inequality – is termed as the African indigenous image. Most of them are the African born black authors representing the SSA through their writing at the global front.

Alexander McCall Smith is a Zimbabwean born white author and one of those writers who portray the affirmative life of Africa. Despite all those harsh realities, in the perception of Smith, readers interpret its beauty fruitioning his motive of representing the SSA in a positive sense. With the SSA, he finds nothing wrong as what he views ever since his birth in Africa. His acuity of looking at it is quite different than all other authors. He expresses his contentment in his stays in Africa coupled with his regular visits. Here is what Alex Perry mentions about it:

...he portrays Africa not as a cauldron of war, disease and children with flies in their eyes, but as a proud, tranquil and hopeful place, where people lead full, ordinary lives and savor red bush tea amid rising prosperity. Often they manage all this without ever meeting a white man.¹

The Time correspondent Alex Perry states that there is none who recounts the SSA beyond shameful creatures of war, disease and dreadfully bad children. In spite of all that, people are gratified and optimistic of their country. The people derive joy from ordinary things and

where they would barely need a white man. The picture Smith creates is humbly a life of sensible African people. All this and more, Jeff Chu brings forth quoting Smith:

“People don't usually see this side of Africa,” McCall Smith says by way of explaining the books' success. “They just see war, famine and oppression.”²

The observation of Perry corresponds with Jeff Chu. They are reassured that the people around the world tend to witness mere only the evil side of Africa as war, famine and oppression, on the contrary; Smith looks the other way round with expectant impression. The very African setting which people blackens win for Smith incredible success.

Steve Meacham charges the non-Africans that it is the problem with the non-Africans who are reluctant to discover the good things and the civility of the African countries but are intent to see only the abysmal condition with their motive set of what and how Africa should be exhibited by disproving of the progressive side:

..tend to focus on the pathological, on the failed economies, the corruption, civil war, genocide³

It is true with them; Africa suffers due to terrible economies, corruption, civil war, genocide etc. In the same line of angle, only the problems in Africa brought before the world by them, but the BBC features with Smith's optimistic writing as:

...McCall Smith's writing offers an escape to a place that celebrates moral certainty, warmth and compassion.⁴

The bare problems are negated to be the problems and the SSA is looked at as lively and genial life. Alike other African writers, problems do crop up in the fiction of Smith but they are presented in a fashion of illustration to be lived and celebrated with warmth and compassion for one another offering an escape from all those glitches of life but to cherish life showered upon them.

And to conclude the introduction of what Africa is in terms of Smith is, it is creation:

‘...optimism through his characters and their dramas’ and ‘gives the right sort of attention to Africa and its people.’⁵

The characters in the fiction *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* are conventional, moderately literate but portrayed as the real personas of the African image with a lantern of hope, life and happiness than the miseries. The reviewers admire this particular phenomenon of Smith that he continues to deal with ever since his first volume of the fiction began in 1998 till the recent fourteenth volume in the series.

An overview on the state of the sub Saharan Africa exemplifies how the optimism has been effective in the African nations. Needless to repeat that it is a cauldron of distress, an economic survey report caters a more positive picture of the SSA along with the First and Third World nations. Life in Africa is extremely pathetic still their positive disposition to the economic condition is a mark of change. This is what a Survey holds about the SSA and the developed nations:

Even though many in Africa continue to face serious financial adversity, their economic outlook is more positive than many others around the world, and they are hopeful about their children's future. Overall, Africans, along with Asians and Latin Americans, tend to express more positive views about economic conditions than do Europeans and Middle Easterners. Similarly, optimism for the next generation is higher in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.⁶

The Survey agrees with the fact that the SSA undergoes a stark economic and social conditions but their outlook is substantially positive against many First World nations which is coupled with the constructive future in the next generations. The statistics provided by the Survey shows that eight African nations are dissatisfied with their economic conditions so is worse mood in the Middle East and Europe. It shows the economy of Africa is in good shape with 41% compared with that of 27% in the Middle East and just 15% in Europe. The concern of the African states is that they are rising while the other nations shown are already developed while the former need to invest in the fundamental needs to step up further to developmental streak. In spite of this, picture of the Middle East and Europe is grim against the poor Africa. That is why the Survey also notes; as long as their basic necessities are not fulfilled to an extent of satisfaction their economy is considerably affected, the Survey further mentions even though many African countries struggle to afford life's basic necessities, they have a considerable optimism about their future.

As it is mentioned earlier, the next generation is the source of their optimism. Not only is the next generation but their common outlook towards life and economy also makes their future optimistic. They accentuate on the well-being of children what they have barely achieved during their entire course of lives. The trends are in contrast with the Middle East and Europe, the Africans, Asians, and Latin Americans children to be better off than that of their parents. The potential in the children of these continents is remarkably substantial and of course the future of those nations.

Indisputably the First World is abundantly developed in all respects, as of their necessities are concerned, they need nothing to do. Obviously they look beyond these issues as such. Their progress graph continues to be all time high, then what fetters them in their development streak is notable. The Survey regards with a strong opinion about the Western Europe, the US, Canada, Australia, Japan and Middle East as badly affected by the inertia of pessimism. Even their next generation seems to be miserable due to being overshadowed by the pessimism; however Africa, Asia and Latin America are steadily inching ahead achieving each milestone of development.

The paper attempts to explore the optimism in the Motswana fiction of Smith entitled *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* vis-à-vis Africa. As the fiction deals with social life of Botswana, it explores the qualities of Botswana than other African nations. The author produces a reflection of a simple and practical approach of the Batswana what dissuades them from any misdemeanour against others and upholds the Motswana image high and integral which obviously identifies them as different from the other African countries. With the illustration of minor incidents and their daily lifestyle that the Batswana practice in their daily life and Smith makes them effective in bringing about the pukka positive image of Botswana that represents the SSA in many respects. The way Mma Ramotswe exhibits her concerns for other fellow African is a significant mark in that regard:

If we do not keep our promises, then there will be no difference between Botswana and a certain other country in Africa which I do not want to name here but which I know you know.⁷

This manifests that the Batswana strive to uphold the Motswana image even against their own African counterparts. He depicts Botswana as the most decent place for the Africans and foreigners as visitors and settlers. The instances given below help prove this argument; Smith and his family are seen, at outset, to be the first witnesses to have fallen in love with the country, the American Curtin family, an Indian Patel family, Dr. Komoti, Dr. Cronje and number of South African and African characters glorify Botswana in the best terms. These are some of the figurative characters peeping into the fiction including the many

representations of foreigners and those of the British people in the British governed countries. An American Mrs. Curtin a character from the fiction puts Botswana as-

I think that I can say that I had never been happier in my life. We had found a country where the people treated one another well, with respect, and where there were values other than the grab, grab, grab which prevails back. I felt humbled, in a way. Everything about my country seemed so shoddy and superficial when held up against what I saw in Africa. People suffered here, and many of them had very little, but they had this wonderful feeling for others – complete strangers – their brother and sister, it sounded odd to my ears. But after a while I knew exactly what it meant and I started to think the same way.⁸

Mrs Curtin's is a perfect illustration. A woman born and brought up in America admires Motswana people who, she believes, respect one another and their values. In spite of their suffering, they feel for others what is hardly found in her country. Being in love with Africa, her expression of happiness gives way to her feelings for the people. And her son, who had been reluctant to stay in Africa, stayed back alone while his parents left for America with the end of his father's tenure. He offered himself for the poor rural Batswana. His demise, she doesn't repent because, she deems, it was for the sane soil of Africa besides he offered his life for those people whom she holds in high respect. A factory owner originally a Motswana returns from South Africa abandoning his thriving business to enjoy the freedom denied to him in that country. He chooses freedom, peace of mind and security to his family.

The characters are sensible enough to realise what they mean for their country and how it identifies different from other African nations. This sensibility always keeps them avowed for the betterment of the country. They ascertain their commitment even from a trivial act in speech to action. Obed Ramotswe is one such character; he was thoroughly stanch towards the national honour. As a miner in South Africa, he showed his patriotism for his fellow miners. So is his daughter Precious Ramotswe:

She loved her country, Botswana, which is a place of peace, and she loved Africa, for all its trials. I am not ashamed to be called an African patriot, said Mma Ramotswe. I love all the people whom God made, but I especially know how to love the people who live in this place. They are my people, my brothers and sisters. It is my duty to help them to solve the mysteries in their lives.⁹

At the outset of the fiction, the protagonist Precious Ramotswe expresses her patriotism like her patriot father that it is her peaceable country which she loves. She feels no shame for its trials and for the people made by God. She very proudly calls them her people as brothers and sisters. The only detective agency in Africa, she believes, is to help her people in their problems. It is not just the protagonist but all Batswana believe and practice to help other fellow Motswana in his suffering. Obed Ramotswe, when he was in South Africa, assured with faith with the white man who took his hand and shook, he felt good at it as everything was not bad and he called for the first time to a white man as 'my brother'.

There are some criminal intent people but unlike the mysteries, they are not like cold blooded murderers, in fact, the fiction itself is devoid of any such crimes which can be treated and punished ruthlessly. There are all minor crimes or activities with the help of them; the writer presents the Motswana optimism. For instance, a wife wants a stolen car by her husband that he has been using as his own to be returned to its owner but without the police knowing. Her realization of crime fails her to get her husband sued and makes her accomplice but she believes that only the Lord to know about her crime. In another episode, Moretsi feigns to

have cut his finger and claims insurance and exposed to be the same finger cut twice. What he explains in support of his crime is truly moving:

‘I am looking after my parents,’ he said. ‘And I have a sister who is sick with a disease that is killing everybody these days. You know what I’m talking about. She has children. I have to support them.’¹⁰

Mma Ramotswe unearths the fraud of finger cutting. As a factory worker, he fails to meet the heavy expenses of his family involving his old parents, ailing sister of AIDS and her children. He confesses his offence that he does for family; Mma Ramotswe reasons it to be trivial against his odd circumstance. Moreover it is notable here about him; he helps his sister who is fighting against AIDS that is creating havoc in the country. Realization of guilt and wrong is observed as the utmost element in the characters. A character like Moretsi misleads the system but for an upright cause. The protagonist feels pride for the people like Moretsi who are conscious of their minor slips and mistakes but whacks at those who are not by disdaining for being unmoved by their acts of betrayal and dishonesty; she states such immoral bent people damage the image of the country.

Smith consciously moulds his characters as the replicas of Botswana depicting the real people of the country. Their indigenous characteristics are represented being committed to their people, society and country what seem to be imbibed upon them from their birth. They derive happiness in anything that belongs to Botswana as Mr JLB Matekoni insists proudly upon the Motswana diamond for his fiancé. Mma Ramotswe and her assistant Mma Makutsi relish the bush tea in the office that gives them joy because, they believe, it is possible only in Botswana. Obed Ramotswe shares this very feeling about the country:

I am just a tiny person in Africa, but there is a place for me, and for everybody, to sit down on this earth and touch it and call it their own.¹¹

Mma Ramotswe honours her father Obed Ramotswe in the eminence of the pioneer of Botswana Seretse Khama for his nationalism. He treated himself a small person in Africa with abundant pride for his country and Africa. His daughter shares the similar feeling for the fellow Africans that descended from Obed although whatever the bad things in Africa they call their own earth. Obed Ramotswe, Mma Ramotswe, Mr JLB Matekoni, Mma Makutsi, Mma Potokwani etc feel for their people, country and Africa. There is hardly a character with penitence for this identity of an African, on the contrary, feels a stanch pride. Mma Ramotswe calls her people as genuine, down-to-earth and loyal to Africa that is why she does not want Africa to change and her people to become like everybody else, soulless, selfish, forgetful of what it means to be an African to them. She wants people to respect being African and relish whatever they have and others do not, that is peace of mind and feeling for one another that others barely have in spite of all privileges at their hand.

Conclusion:

Literary authors engaged in portrayal of Africa are typically bent on bringing about the black side of Africa except a few. With this paper, an effort is made to explore the SSA in a positive perspective than the conventional one. Alexander McCall Smith is admired for his endeavor of presenting the optimistic side of Africa with his case and the fiction in question. On a query of the feedback of the Batswana about whom the fiction deals, Smith shares that, they feel, they are being reflected in the fiction as what they are and the author is treated as one of them. To conclude with Mma Ramotswe’s statement about Botswana, she feels:

...Africa, wisdom, understanding, good things to eat, pumpkins, chicken, the smell of sweet cattle breath, the white sky across the endless, endless bush, and the giraffe that

cried, giving its tears for women to daub on their baskets; O Botswana, my country, my place.¹²

There are a few good phenomena about Botswana to be proud of. For instance eating of pumpkins, chicken, smell of cattle, white sky, bush, giraffe etc are merely minor stuff but they remain iconic for each Motswana and she calls her own country and never wishes to be changed. Africa and Botswana is their resilient pride for epoch, both continue as source of optimism for each African.

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